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# Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations in Brief

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## Introduction

Several Turkish foreign and domestic policy issues have significant relevance for U.S. interests, and Congress plays an active role in shaping and overseeing U.S. relations with Turkey.

This report provides information and analysis relevant for Congress on the following:

- Assessments of U.S.-Turkey relations, Turkish foreign policy, and Turkey's strategic orientation.
- Turkish efforts to cooperate with the United States and other countries to more closely control the flow of people and goods—especially foreign fighters—to and from Syria's conflict areas.
- Key issues regarding Turkey's domestic politics and economy, including June 2015 parliamentary elections and controversies and congressional interest regarding Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the future of the country's constitutional system.

For additional information, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti; and CRS Insight IN10164, *Turkey-U.S. Cooperation Against the "Islamic State": A Unique Dynamic?* by Jim Zanotti.

## U.S.-Turkey Relations and Turkish Foreign Policy

There have been many situations in which the United States and Turkey have made common cause during their decades-long alliance in NATO, but their strategic cooperation also has a history of complications. This is based largely on divergences in how the two countries' leaders have assessed their respective interests given different geographical positions, threat perceptions, and roles in regional and global political and security architectures. Domestic politics in both countries have also played a role. Yet, both countries have continued to affirm the importance of an enduring strategic relationship. A number of policy differences have arisen in the past few years. It remains unclear whether these differences are mainly the latest manifestations of structural tension, or whether they signal a more substantive change in the bilateral relationship.

Turkey has become a more influential actor in the Middle East in the past decade, having sought to leverage its unique regional status as a Muslim-majority democracy with a robust economy and membership in NATO. Recent foreign and domestic policy developments may have rendered Turkey less potent or desirable than once generally supposed as a shaper of regional outcomes, a model for neighboring countries, and a facilitator of U.S. interests.<sup>1</sup> However, it remains a key regional power that shares linkages and characteristics with the West that may distinguish it from other potentially region-shaping Muslim-majority powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Therefore, working with Turkey is likely to remain relevant for the advancement of U.S. interests in the increasingly volatile region.<sup>2</sup> This may be especially true if there are significant changes in

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Blaise Misztal, et al., "Elections in Turkey: Foreign Policy Reset Unlikely Under President Erdogan," *The American Interest* Online, August 7, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., M. Hakan Yavuz and Mujeeb R. Khan, "Turkey Treads a Positive Path," *New York Times*, February 12, (continued...)

U.S. relations with Iran that affect the larger regional context of widespread instability and complex alignments among various states and non-state actors.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, engagement with Turkey—critical as it might be on specific issues—is unlikely to overshadow other aspects of a U.S. multilateral approach to addressing problems in the region.

Turkey's NATO membership and economic interdependence with Europe appear to have contributed to important Turkish decisions to rely on, and partner with, sources of Western strength. However, as Turkey has prospered under these circumstances, its economic success has driven its efforts to seek greater overall self-reliance and independence in foreign policy. As Turkey's energy consumption grows along with its economy, its dependence on other countries (including Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Azerbaijan) for most of this energy<sup>4</sup> may be one of many factors included in Turkish national security calculations.

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2015.

<sup>3</sup> Turkey has a range of concerns regarding Iran on matters that include Iran's nuclear program, Iraq, and Syria. Additionally, Erdogan has voiced support for ongoing Saudi-led Arab military efforts against Houthis in Yemen, denouncing what he has characterized as efforts by Iran—reportedly the Houthis' main outside backer—to dominate the region.

<sup>4</sup> For U.S. government information on the main sources of Turkish energy imports, see <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=TU>.

**Figure I. Turkey: Map and Basic Facts**



Domestic political changes from a military-guided leadership to a civilian one based largely on conservative Sunni Muslim majority sentiment may have heightened Turkish leaders' reluctance to support Western military action (such as ongoing action in Syria and Iraq), which many Turks describe as targeting Sunni Muslims.<sup>5</sup> According to one prominent U.S.-based commentator, "Sunni sectarianism and Islamic romanticism in pursuit of Muslim Brotherhood priorities"<sup>6</sup> have helped drive Turkish foreign policy in recent years. Such perceptions may have led to or reinforced differences between Turkey and the United States on issues such as these:

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Gonul Tol, "Is Turkey finally ready to aid military strikes against ISIS?," *CNN.com*, September 25, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Omer Taspinar, "From Neo-Ottomanism to Turkish Gaullism," *todayzaman.com*, March 15, 2015.

- Possible Turkish support or permissiveness regarding the use of Turkish territory for the supply and transit of Syrian jihadists and foreign fighters opposing the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Asad.
- General Abdel Fattah al Sisi's ousting of Egypt's elected president Muhammad Morsi (a Muslim Brotherhood figure) in 2013 and his subsequent steps as Egypt's new ruler to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood.
- Turkey's political support for Hamas, reported harboring of Hamas operational leaders,<sup>7</sup> and regular denunciations of Israel,<sup>8</sup> which are points of contention with some Members of Congress.<sup>9</sup>
- U.S. and international material support since late 2014 for the Syrian Kurdish group PYD (Democratic Union of Syria)<sup>10</sup> to help it defend territory against the Islamic State organization (also known as ISIL or ISIS).

When popular Arab uprisings broke out in a number of countries in 2011, Turkey largely aligned itself with the U.S. policy of supporting nascent regional democratic movements. Subsequent Turkish policy differences with the United States may stem in part from Turkish leaders' apparent claims that the United States abandoned this initial democratic support for a stance that seems to prioritize stability and the avoidance of direct military intervention—leaving Turkey largely isolated<sup>11</sup> after it had earlier taken positions more closely in line with the United States. Turkish leaders also manifest concern that U.S. expectations of Turkish cooperation regarding Syria and Iraq are insufficiently sensitive to Turkey's domestic pressures and security vulnerabilities. Turkey faces the significant burden of hosting refugees from both Syria and Iraq; more than 1.75 million Syrian refugees have entered Turkey since 2011, and they are particularly concentrated in its south and its main urban centers. Turkish President (formerly Prime Minister) Erdogan and President Obama reportedly have had less direct interaction since 2013, perhaps owing to differences over both foreign policy and the Turkish government's handling of domestic affairs.<sup>12</sup> Yet, Turkey is reportedly partnering with the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition in a number of ways short of active combat.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Transcript of September 9, 2014, hearing of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, entitled "Hamas' Benefactors: A Network of Terror"; Tulin Daloglu, "Israel accuses Turkey of aiding Hamas coup plan," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, October 22, 2014

<sup>8</sup> "Erdogan calls Israel more barbaric than Hitler," *Times of Israel/Associated Press*, July 19, 2014; Sena Alkan, "Turkey Takes Action to Ensure a Permanent Ceasefire," *dailysabah.com*, July 18, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> During his presidential campaign in August 2014, Erdogan publicly criticized a private letter from the four co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus on U.S.-Turkey Relations, characterizing it as a threat that called for a response. The letter took issue with Erdogan's anti-Israel rhetoric. "Congressional Turkish caucus raps Erdogan for Israel comments," *JTA*, August 6, 2014. An AKP parliamentary leader subsequently sent a written response disputing the letter's assertions. Eli Lake, "Turkish Leader Doubles Down on Blaming Israel for Anti-Semitism," *Daily Beast*, August 6, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> PYD is aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has engaged in an on-and-off insurgency against the Turkish government since the 1980s and is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. In the State Department's October 20, 2014, daily press briefing, its deputy spokesperson said that "the PYD is a different group than the PKK legally, under United States law."

<sup>11</sup> Semih Idiz, "Some see snubs, Erdogan sees envy," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, February 17, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "The Fragile Thaw in U.S.-Turkey Relations," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2402, April 7, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to initiatives on foreign fighters discussed below, such partnership efforts have reportedly included (1) agreeing to hold U.S.-funded anti-Islamic State training of Syrians on Turkish territory (though public U.S.-Turkey differences persist over whether those trained might also oppose the Asad regime); (2) U.S. military reconnaissance (continued...)

To date, Turkey has insisted on the creation of “safe zones” in northern Syria to provide a more secure base of operations for the Syrian opposition and to address refugee concerns, and has insisted on a more robust anti-Asad strategy, before agreeing to permit attacks on the Islamic State from its territory. Some Members of Congress have expressed support for establishing humanitarian safe zones in Syria.<sup>14</sup> Obama Administration officials may hope that Turkey will eventually ease its preconditions on the use of its territory because of its proximity to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and its presumed desire for a durable political resolution. Coalition access to Turkish bases could have particular operational value in helping the Iraqi government take back Mosul and other key areas.<sup>15</sup> However, increased Turkish flexibility might be hindered by persistent Turkish concerns about possible Islamic State retaliatory moves, through sleeper cells or other means.<sup>16</sup>

## Turkey and the Syrian Conflict: Foreign Fighters and Smuggling

Congress and other U.S. policymakers, along with many international actors, have shown significant concern about the use of Turkish territory by various groups and individuals involved in Syria’s conflict—including foreign fighters from around the world—for transit, safe haven, and smuggling. According to National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) Director Nicholas Rasmussen, in February 2015 congressional hearing testimony,

There is no single pipeline for foreign fighter travel into and out of Syria. Violent extremists take different routes, including land, air and sea. Most routes do involve transit through Turkey because of its geographic proximity to the Syrian border areas where most of these groups operate.<sup>17</sup>

In the initial stages of the Syrian conflict, Turkey and various Arab Gulf states reportedly provided direct support to Syrian opposition groups, in some cases reportedly with U.S. facilitation or consultation. At that point, Turkish authorities were allowing use of their territory for arms shipments and personnel movements.<sup>18</sup> During 2013 and 2014, as the makeup of the Syrian opposition became increasingly complex, with jihadist groups emerging as among the

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flights over Syria and Iraq; and (3) Turkish training and military assistance to Iraqi Kurdish (Kurdish Regional Government) *peshmerga* and non-lethal military assistance to the Iraqi central government.

<sup>14</sup> See text of April 21, 2015, letter to President Obama from four senators at <http://www.durbin.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/durbin-graham-kaine-mccain-urge-president-to-establish-humanitarian-safe-zones-in-syria->.

<sup>15</sup> According to one analyst, “The Incirlik base in southern Turkey is a vital asset for any future U.S. operations to help liberate Mosul, as are the nearby bases at Diyarbakir, Batman, and Malatya.” Cagaptay, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Foreign fighters with possible jihadist links have been implicated in a March 2014 terrorist attack at a vehicular checkpoint in central Turkey (perpetrators from the Balkans) and a January 2015 suicide bombing at an Istanbul police station (perpetrator from the Russian North Caucasus).

<sup>17</sup> Transcript of hearing of the House Homeland Security Committee, February 11, 2015. In February 26, 2015 congressional testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper estimated that 60 percent of foreign fighters come to Syria through Turkey.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, “Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.,” *New York Times*, March 24, 2013.



most effective fighters, Turkey and other regional states were reportedly slower than the United States and other international actors in curtailing activities seen as bolstering Sunni Islamist radicals. This may largely reflect priorities they may have to oust the Iran-backed Assad regime. Some reports raised the possibility that Turkish intelligence may have provided material support to the Islamic State in at least one instance,<sup>19</sup> and possibly exchanged as many as 180 Islamic State fighters to secure the September 2014 release of 49 hostages taken three months earlier at the Turkish consulate in Mosul, Iraq.<sup>20</sup> A few months after the Islamic State's summer 2014 takeover of considerable portions of Iraqi territory, Vice President Joe Biden said that Turkey and other countries had contributed to a sectarian proxy war in an attempt to oust Assad, and that President Erdogan had told him "we let too many people through, now we are trying to seal the border."<sup>21</sup> Erdogan responded by publicly denying that he had made those statements to Biden, and Biden subsequently issued an apology.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lale Sariibrahimoglu, "On the borderline – Turkey's ambiguous approach to Islamic State," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, October 16, 2014.

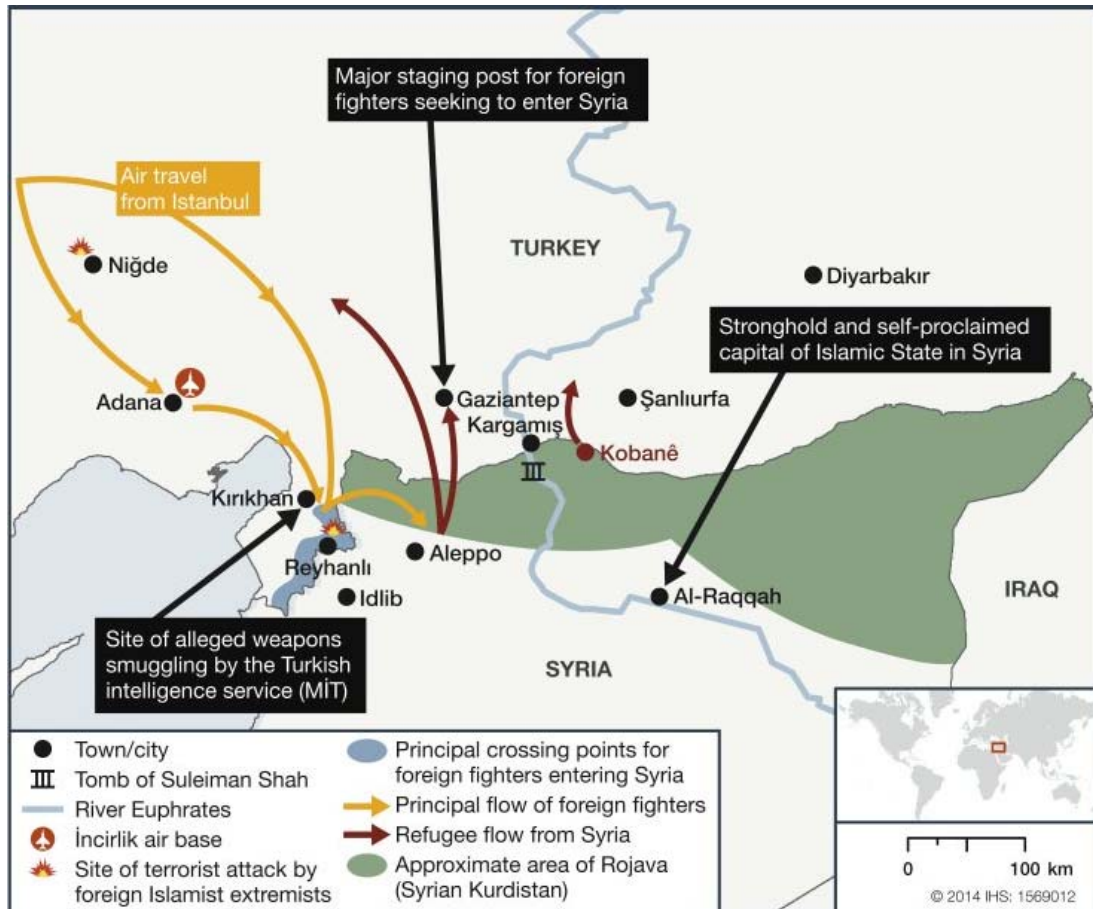
<sup>20</sup> "UK jihadist prisoner swap reports 'credible,'" *BBC News*, October 6, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Sariibrahimoglu, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 2. Key Sites Denoting Flows of People and Goods Between Turkey and Syria**  
(as of October 2014)



**Source:** *Jane's Intelligence Review*

**Notes:** In February 2015, the Turkish military moved the site of the tomb of Suleiman Shah (a sovereign Turkish exclave within Syrian territory) to an area closer to the Turkish border to reduce its vulnerability to attack from the Islamic State organization. CRS takes no official position on any borders or locations denoted above.

Most sources and U.S. officials acknowledge that, in response to international pressure<sup>23</sup> and growing Turkish official recognition of threats posed to Turkish security by the Islamic State and other jihadists, Turkey has introduced or bolstered existing initiatives in recent months aimed at (1) preventing potential foreign fighters from entering Turkey, (2) preventing those who enter Turkey from traveling to Syria, and (3) curbing illicit oil smuggling used to finance jihadist activities.<sup>24</sup> According to a Turkish government source,<sup>25</sup> these measures include the following:

- Enforcing a no-entry list (created in 2011) for individuals suspected of traveling to join radical groups in Syria. The list has grown from 4,822 names from 83

<sup>23</sup> U.N. Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2178 (passed in August and September 2014, respectively) call upon member states to curtail flows of weapons, financing, and fighters to various terrorist groups.

<sup>24</sup> For information on oil smuggling from Syria into Turkey, see CRS Report R43980, *Islamic State Financing and U.S. Policy Approaches*, by Carla E. Humud, Robert Pirog, and Liana W. Rosen.

<sup>25</sup> March 17, 2015, factsheet provided to CRS by the Turkish government.

different countries in 2014 to more than 12,500 names from more than 90 countries as of March 2015. Based on the list, Turkish authorities deported 557 people in 2014, close to three times the amount deported in either 2012 (203) or 2013 (192).

- Establishing “risk analysis units” in April 2014 for the detection of travelers’ possible intent to join Syrian extremist organizations. As of January 2015, 517 individuals<sup>26</sup> had been denied entry into Turkey by these units at various land border gates, airports, and bus terminals.
- Enhanced security at the Syrian border, including the general closure of most border gates, the deployment of additional army units and special operations battalions to border areas, and the creation of physical impediments<sup>27</sup> to counter illegal crossings and smuggling.
- Employing and enhancing “forceful and ongoing measures” (dating from 2012) to curb oil smuggling, including the capture of oil stores and destruction of illegal pipelines.<sup>28</sup>

In late March 2015, Turkey reportedly closed all of its gates at the Syrian border based on possible terrorist threats. It is unclear when they will reopen, and some reports indicate that crossings at other points along the border continue.<sup>29</sup> Turkey faces challenges in pursuing policies that can simultaneously provide a humanitarian corridor for refugees and humanitarian assistance while clamping down on foreign fighter flows and smuggling.

NCTC Director Rasmussen, in his February 2015 congressional testimony, maintained that successfully stemming the flow of foreign fighters would require comprehensive partnership with Turkey in a number of fields, including intelligence, law enforcement, and diplomacy. He said that Turkish cooperation was “profoundly effective” in some areas, but also said, “Turkey will always look at its interests through the prism of their own sense of self-interest, and how they prioritize particular requests that we make for cooperation doesn’t always align with our prioritization.”<sup>30</sup> Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, in February congressional testimony, said that public opinion polls in Turkey show that its people “don’t see ISIL as a primary threat,” and that they focus more on other priorities such as domestic Kurdish issues and the economy.<sup>31</sup>

When asked directly by a Member of Congress about how Turkey could help reduce the flow of foreign fighters, Clapper characterized Turkey’s laws as “permissive” and expressed hope that Turkish leaders would change them to more stringently control transit through the country.<sup>32</sup> In

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<sup>26</sup> Per April 17, 2015, CRS email correspondence with U.S. government officials based in Turkey, this number has since increased to 740.

<sup>27</sup> According to the March 17 Turkish government factsheet, “In 2014, we had dug 200 miles long ditches; constructed 37 miles-long earth embankment and 100 miles-long wire barriers; built 8 miles-long walls; illuminated an area that stretches 165 miles; installed thermal cameras and night vision systems.”

<sup>28</sup> See also Desmond Butler, “Turkey cracks down on oil smuggling linked to IS,” *Associated Press*, October 6, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Joanna Paraszczuk, “Despite Crackdown, IS Says Turkey-Syria Border Still Open,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 8, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Transcript of hearing of the House Homeland Security Committee, February 11, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Transcript of hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, February 26, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

response to a request to provide further information related to Clapper's statements, U.S. government officials based in Turkey<sup>33</sup> have stated that the Turkish government has increased implementation of "existing laws and administrative actions over the last year to interdict potential [foreign fighters]," and has asserted that it is "in the process of carrying out a comparison study of current [counterterrorism] statutes in European countries" for purposes of compliance with U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2178. Nevertheless, as of April 2015, the U.S. officials are seeking a way to increase bilateral information sharing despite limitations to such sharing in Turkish procedural law. They also would support changes to Turkey's anti-terrorism laws that help Turkey comply with UNSCR 2178 requirements to cover a fuller range of activity that they assert should be criminalized to address foreign fighter issues.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to apparent divergences with the United States in how Turkey accords priority to countering threats it perceives from the Islamic State, the Assad regime, and various Kurdish groups, Turkish officials cited in various media reports point to a number of difficulties they face in completely cutting off the flow of fighters to Syria. The long border with Syria is difficult to completely seal, and Turkey faces challenges in blocking foreign fighters at ports of entry because they change their routes and appearances in anticipation of countermeasures.<sup>35</sup> According to one source, "Turkish officials also say they are limited by restraints on intelligence sharing from Western countries, which they say has improved but remains inadequate."<sup>36</sup> Turkish officials insist that Turkey "cannot deport or arrest individuals at a whim and that it needs actionable intelligence or clear criminal indicators. Otherwise it risks being cast as draconian – and losing some of its appeal as a tourist destination."<sup>37</sup> Turkish officials also say that the European countries of origin for many of the foreign fighters accessing Syria through Turkey need to "fix the problem at its root, stopping the demonization of Islam in Europe, which [Turkish officials] say contributes to radicalization in the first place."<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Turkish authorities may feel constrained in the vigorousness with which they counter the Islamic State because of the possible concerns mentioned above regarding potential retaliatory moves via sleeper cells or other means.

A relatively small fraction of foreign fighters entering Syria are Turkish. The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) estimated as of January 2015 that 600 Turkish citizens—out of an estimated total of 20,000 individuals worldwide—have gone to Syria to join various groups involved in the conflict.<sup>39</sup> Some media reports have claimed that radical Salafist sects have appealed to a number of young Turkish recruits for the Islamic State organization on the basis of both ideology and offers of material gain.<sup>40</sup> Some observers have

<sup>33</sup> This information was provided to CRS in email correspondence on April 17, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. For example, one suggestion would be to broaden these laws' applicability beyond "membership in an armed terrorist organization" to a number of individual or organizational activities, including those linked with travel, recruitment, financing, training, planning, and commitment of or intent to commit terrorist acts.

<sup>35</sup> Dominique Soguel, "Is Turkey still a 'jihadist highway' to Syria – or is that a bum rap?," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 2, 2015; Tim Arango and Eric Schmitt, "A Path to ISIS, Through a Porous Turkish Border," *New York Times*, March 10, 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Arango and Schmitt, op. cit. Reportedly, the European Union does not fully cooperate in the areas of police and judicial cooperation because Turkey does not have a data protection law, and because of differences between the two in defining and penalizing terrorism. Sariibrahimoglu, op. cit.

<sup>37</sup> Soguel, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Arango and Schmitt, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Peter R. Neumann, "Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s," ICSR, January 26, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Ceylan Yeginsu, "ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits from Turkey," *New York Times*, September 15, 2014.

raised questions regarding the Turkish government's level of commitment to countering domestic radicalization and recruitment, and have warned of the potential "Pakistanization" of Turkey.<sup>41</sup> The government insists that counter-radicalization programs exist throughout the country—with special emphasis on at-risk areas—and that authorities monitor Turkish-language recruitment websites.<sup>42</sup>

## Domestic Politics

Turkish parliamentary elections scheduled for June 7, 2015, will take place within a context of controversy regarding power, constitutional democracy, and civil liberties in Turkey and their influence on the country's domestic, regional, and global profile. See CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti, for a broader overview of Turkey's domestic politics.

After a majority of voters chose Erdogan as president in August 2014 over two other candidates in Turkey's first direct election for that office, he announced his intention to forge an "executive presidency" actively engaged in directing the affairs of state. This vision is generally seen as interpreting the president's constitutional powers more broadly than the powers were exercised by Erdogan's predecessors in the office. After Erdogan was elected president, he designated then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to serve as prime minister, though Erdogan reportedly remains the ultimate decisionmaker on most significant policy issues. In addition, Erdogan is reportedly seeking to have the party from which he hails (the Justice and Development Party, or AKP) gain enough support in the June elections to facilitate a change to Turkey's constitution establishing a formal presidential system that may be subject to fewer checks and balances than such systems in the United States and other president-led countries.<sup>43</sup>

The usual contentiousness of Turkish politics has intensified in the past two years due to (1) widespread domestic protests in June 2013 and the authorities' vigorous response to them; and (2) various steps taken by the government to strengthen the position of elected officials within the system following December 2013 corruption-related arrests of figures with government ties. Such steps have included attempts to marginalize the Fethullah Gulen movement (an influential array of civil society groups) and other government critics or perceived critics or dissenters.<sup>44</sup>

U.S. and European Union (EU) officials and observers have perhaps become more attuned to concerns regarding civil liberties and checks and balances in Turkey, partly because of these issues' potential to affect Turkey's economic viability and regional political role. In March 2015, 74 Senators signed a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry protesting media repression and

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<sup>41</sup> Michael M. Tanchum and Halil M. Karaveli, "Pakistan's Lessons for Turkey," *New York Times*, October 5, 2014. The term refers to the way in which Pakistan's own internal security and civil society have been undermined in recent decades by its use as a way station and safe haven for parties to Afghanistan's various conflicts.

<sup>42</sup> March 17, 2015, factsheet provided to CRS by the Turkish government.

<sup>43</sup> Semih Idiz, "Erdogan aims to create stronger presidential system," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, February 3, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> For more information on these issues and the Fethullah Gulen movement in Turkey, the United States, and internationally, see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti. The corruption charges brought in December 2013 were dropped in October 2014, and in January 2015 the Turkish parliament cleared four government ministers who had also been implicated. Debate persists among the government, the Gulen movement, and other interested parties over whether the movement influenced the investigations and arrests.

editorship in Turkey,<sup>45</sup> following a similar February 2015 letter signed by 89 Representatives.<sup>46</sup> However, it is unclear to what extent non-Turkish actors will play a significant role in resolving unanswered questions regarding Turkey's commitment to democracy and limited government, its secular-religious balance, and its Kurdish question. Erdogan and his supporters periodically refer to Western criticism in apparent efforts to galvanize domestic political support against outside influences.<sup>47</sup>

In early 2015, the following two issues dominate domestic debate:

- Efforts by Erdogan to consolidate domestic power and establish a “presidential system.”
- Continuing talks between Turkey's government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) aimed at ending the PKK's 30-year-plus insurgency and providing greater political accommodation and regional autonomy for Turkey's Kurds.

The two issues are interrelated because Erdogan's prospects for changing the constitution may hinge on the June electoral performance of the Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)<sup>48</sup> and whether the HDP aligns with the AKP.<sup>49</sup> Some reports indicate that Prime Minister Davutoglu may be resisting possible efforts by Erdogan to link government concessions to the Kurds with Kurdish backing for a presidential system.<sup>50</sup> These developments are also tied to the ongoing regional and international conflict taking place at Turkey's southern border in Syria and Iraq. Turkey's Kurds have cross-border ties with and sympathies for Kurds imperiled by the Islamic State organization in Syria and Iraq, and (as discussed above) Turkey faces a number of security and socioeconomic concerns stemming from the Syrian refugees it hosts and the militants that might use or transit its territory.

## Economy

The AKP's political successes have been aided considerably by robust Turkish economic growth since the early 2000s. Growth rates, fueled by diversified Turkish conglomerates (such as Koc and Sabanci) from traditional urban centers as well as “Anatolian tigers” (small- to medium-sized, export-oriented businesses concentrated in central and southern Turkey), have been comparable at times in the past decade and a half to those of China, India, and other major

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<sup>45</sup> The text of the letter is available at <http://www.schumer.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/schumer-and-70-senate-colleagues-call-on-state-dept-to-address-ongoing-intimidation-of-media-and-censorship-of-the-press-in-turkey-under-president-erdogans-administration>.

<sup>46</sup> Tolga Tanis, “US Congressmen send Kerry letter about Turkey's crackdown on Gülen-linked media,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 6, 2015. The Senate and House letters both elicited charges from Erdogan and state-run or -linked media outlets that the Fethullah Gülen movement was both responsible for the letters and has material influence on a number of the signers. “Gülen lobby influences US lawmakers letter on Turkey,” *Anadolu Agency*, February 15, 2015; Ragıp Soylu, “Gülen Movement woos US congressmen with campaign donations and free trips,” *dailysabah.com*, February 9, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Mustafa Akyol, “What turned Erdogan against the West?,” *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, February 3, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Omer Taspinar, “The paradox in Turkish politics,” *todayzaman.com*, March 29, 2015; Seyfettin Gürsel, “Scenarios for the general election,” *todayzaman.com*, April 10, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Deniz Zeyrek, “HDP will not facilitate presidency: Demirtas,” *hurriyetdailynews.com*, April 6, 2015.

<sup>50</sup> “Turkish politics: Taken hostage,” *Economist*, April 11, 2015.



developing economies. A March 2014 analysis stated that Turkey's citizens were 43% better off economically than when Erdogan became prime minister in 2003.<sup>51</sup>

**Table I. Trends in the Turkish Economy: 1975-2013**

(in billions of current \$)

Turkey	1975	1985	1995	2005	2013
Export	1.4	7.9	21.6	73.5	151.8
Import	4.7	11.3	35.7	116.8	251.6
Total Trade	6.1	19.3	57.3	190.2	403.4
GDP <sup>a</sup>	64.5	67.5	244.9	484	820.2
GDP (per capita)	1,564	1,316	2,773	6,801	10,782
GDP (nominal ranking) <sup>b</sup>	17 <sup>th</sup>	25 <sup>th</sup>	24 <sup>th</sup>	17 <sup>th</sup>	17 <sup>th</sup>
Foreign Total Trade (percentage of GDP)	9	29	23	39	49.2

**Sources:** World Bank Database, IMF; *Global Finance* and Hazine Kontroleri Dernegi; Kemal Kirisci, "TTIP's Enlargement and the Case of Turkey," Woodrow Wilson Center and Istanbul Policy Center, January 2015.

**Notes:**

- a. Current GDP used for GDP section.
- b. Rankings of 1975 and 1985 to be interpreted cautiously due to large amount of missing data.

The dependence of Turkey's economy on foreign capital and exports led to challenges in recent years stemming from the economic slowdown in the EU, Turkey's main trading partner, and from the U.S. Federal Reserve's tightening of monetary policy. Growth slowed from about 8.8% in 2011 to between 2% and 4% in the years since. However, given that Turkey is a net energy importer, the considerable drop in world oil prices since the summer of 2014 has given some lift to growth projections, mitigated inflation, and helped Turkey reduce its generally high current account deficit.

Government regulation and intervention have the potential to affect Turkey's economic trajectory. Although Turkey's central bank has cut its key policy interest rate from 10% in early 2014 to 7.5% in early 2015, President Erdogan has publicly called for larger cuts. The politicization of the issue appears to have factored into the continued fall of Turkey's lira against the dollar.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, the possibility that political motives may have influenced the state's February 2015 regulatory takeover of a bank affiliated with the Fethullah Gulen movement<sup>53</sup> led Standard & Poor's to state that political risks could spill over into the financial system.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, most analyses express optimism about Turkey's fiscal position and banking system, and Turkish

<sup>51</sup> Christopher de Bellaigue, "Turkey Goes Out of Control," *New York Review of Books*, April 3, 2014 Issue (accessed online on March 25, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> "Turkey's economy: A frenzy about interest," *Economist*, March 14, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Mehmet Cetingulec, "Why did Turkey seize Bank Asya?," *Al-Monitor Turkey Pulse*, February 9, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Ece Toksabay, "S&P says Turkey's Bank Asya takeover shows political risk potential," *Reuters*, March 4, 2015.

leaders periodically seek to reassure the public, amid rumors of possible resignations,<sup>55</sup> that key figures who have reputations for sound economic stewardship will continue to serve.<sup>56</sup>

Some analyses of Turkey's economy assert that the "low-hanging fruit"—numerous large infrastructure projects and the scaling up of low-technology manufacturing—that largely drove the previous decade's economic success is unlikely to produce similar results going forward.<sup>57</sup> Structural economic goals for Turkey include incentivizing greater research and development to encourage Turkish technological innovation and global competitiveness, harmonizing the educational system with future workforce needs, encouraging domestic savings, and increasing and diversifying energy supplies to meet ever-growing consumption demands.

Given its customs union with the EU, Turkey has sought inclusion in the potential Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP) that is being negotiated between the United States and the EU. Currently, the U.S. position is that the T-TIP negotiations are already complex, and including additional trading partners may further complicate the negotiations and prospects for concluding a comprehensive and high-standard agreement.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker publicly identified some specific trade policy "obstacles" to including Turkey in T-TIP negotiations during an October 2014 trip there.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, one analyst has suggested that Turkey might consider pursuing other options either to involve Turkey in T-TIP after its creation or to increase trade preferences with the United States and/or EU.<sup>60</sup> Given Turkey's concerns about the potential for T-TIP negotiations to affect its trade relations with both sides, in May 2013 the United States and Turkey agreed to form a High Level Committee (HLC) "to assess such potential impacts and seek new ways to promote bilateral trade and investment, and have since held several working level consultations under the HLC."<sup>61</sup>

## Turkey's Strategic Orientation: Past, Present, Future

Looking at and beyond current regional crises, many observers express opinions on the future trend of Turkey's strategic orientation. Turkey's embrace of the United States and NATO during the Cold War came largely as a reaction to post-World War II actions by the Soviet Union seemingly aimed at moving Turkey and its strategic control of maritime access points into a Soviet sphere of influence. Turkey's historically driven efforts to avoid domination by outside powers—sometimes called the "Sèvres syndrome"—resonate in its ongoing attempts to achieve greater military, economic, and political self-sufficiency and to influence its surrounding environment. Depending on a number of factors, such initiatives could lead Turkey toward a more independent stance, in which decreased dependence on the West might come at least partly

<sup>55</sup> Nick Tattersall, "UPDATE 2-Erdogan tirade against central bank knocks Turkish sentiment," *Reuters*, February 26, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> "Babacan to be part of Turkey's economy team after elections: PM Davutoğlu," *hurriyetdailynews.com*, April 2, 2015.

<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., World Bank, *Turkey's Transitions: Integration, Inclusion, Institutions*, December 2014.

<sup>58</sup> CRS Report R43387, *Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP) Negotiations*, by Shayerah Ilias Akhtar, Vivian C. Jones, and Renée Johnson.

<sup>59</sup> Abdullah Bozkurt, "Pritzker: Turkey needs reforms to engage further in T-TIP," *todayzaman.com*, October 2, 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Kemal Kirisci, "T-TIP's Enlargement and the Case of Turkey," Woodrow Wilson Center and Istanbul Policy Center, January 2015.

<sup>61</sup> U.S. Trade Representative 2015 Trade Policy Agenda, p. 145.



through dealings with a number of other regional and global powers. Whether this could ultimately lead to new dynamics of dependence on or alignment with other powers has become a subject of speculation. In recent years, Turkey has boosted cooperation in certain areas with Russia (energy and trade) and China (trade and defense), among other countries. Some observers assert that domestic developments in Turkey appearing to challenge Western liberal norms may partially echo those in Russia and in some other countries. These observations fuel debate regarding how such trends might affect Turkey's foreign policy partnerships.<sup>62</sup>

A more assertively independent Turkey might still seek to remain within the framework of the NATO alliance. However, the extent to which strategic and practical coordination with other NATO members would continue is unclear, especially if Turkey strengthens ties with countries that challenge U.S. policies globally or regionally. For the time being, Turkey lacks comparable alternatives to its security and economic ties with the West, with which it shares a more than 60-year legacy of institutionalized cooperation. Turkey's leaders may therefore be responsive to efforts by allies and key trading partners to identify priorities relating to this legacy of cooperation. For example, consultations within NATO may have played an important role in Turkey's reconsideration of missile defense co-production with China.<sup>63</sup> However, Turkish leaders' responsiveness could wane over time if they believe that their interests and preferred approaches to issues are not addressed by or reflected in key Western initiatives or institutional frameworks and processes.

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<sup>62</sup> Daniel Dombey, "Putin and Erdogan: not quite kindred spirits," *ft.com*, December 2, 2014.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., Lale Sariibrahimoglu, "Turkey's T-Loramids technology transfer troubles," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, March 4, 2015.